



## Montclair theater review: can this marriage be saved?



*Older Molly (Alicia Hayes), left, and Younger Molly (Caroline Ritacco) share an insight with Jake (Sean Lough), center, in "Jake's Women" at Studio Playhouse. COURTESY CLAUDIA BUDRIS*

**By GWEN OREL**

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As Julie, Brittany Haydock shines with internal light whenever she comes onstage in Neil Simon's "Jake's Women," which runs at Studio Playhouse through Saturday, April 8. Her winsome incandescence may be partially because she's a memory of Jake's (Sean Lough), a writer who has trouble with intimacy.

Yes. This is a play about a man learning to forgive himself, so he can love others.

If that description moves you, you'll love this. If not, you won't, despite Studio's handsome production.

The play is set, the program says, in Jake's apartment, and in his mind. It's a mind full of therapy-speak,

circling around itself.

The plot centers on Jake, a writer very similar to the one in Simon's 1979 film "Chapter Two," who is struggling to come to terms finally with the death of a perfect first wife, and save his second marriage. In this case, that's a marriage to Maggie (an earnest Laura Byrne-Cristiano). (Neil Simon's first wife Joan Baim died in 1973; he married Marsha Mason that same year).

Jake "summons" women in his life when he thinks of them. We meet his daughter Molly, for example at two different ages (a wonderfully bratty Caroline Ritacco plays Molly at 12, while Alicia Hayes, who plays her at 21, and, in her figment form, ferociously rebels). We also meet Jake's quirky sister Karen (Debra Carozza-Lynch, who mugs, but maybe that's just Jake again) and others.

Simon's conventions are unclear: Wikipedia even describes Jake as a writer suffering from psychosis. I doubt that's what Simon intends. Rather, Jake tells the audience that everyone's a writer and everyone imagines conversations.

At times the women behave like straight-up ghosts.

None of this works, and is probably one reason the play ran on Broadway in 1992 for less than a year.

Clearly some people are moved by the play: At Studio, you could hear sniffles when dead mom Julie meets grown-up daughter Molly. But both are in Jake's head, so... what, again?

Since the big question is about whether Maggie and Jake will reunite, it's problematic to discover that in six months apart she's nearly going to accept a proposal and he's had a succession of girlfriends. Despite their therapy speak, neither apparently sees other people as real.

It doesn't help that Lough, who handles the morass of dialogue with grace, lacks a spark with any wife, dead, alive or imaginary.

C0-director E. Dale Smith-Gallo (with Claudia Budris) also designed the set, which is the most successful thing in the production: it's elegant, two-leveled and moody and eloquent. If only that were true of the play.

*'Jake's Women'*

*By Neil Simon*

*Thursday-Saturday 8 p.m., Sunday 3 p.m.*

*Through April 8*

*Directed by E. Dale Smith-Gallo and Claudia Budris*

*Studio Playhouse*

*14 Alvin Place*

[studioplayhouse.org](http://studioplayhouse.org)

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*An earlier version of this article misspelled Brittany Haydock's name.*